Understanding The Lived Experiences of Black Female College Athletes and Factors that Influence their Anxiety

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To inform the development of culturally and socially appropriate interventions, this study examined the lived experiences of Black female college athletes (BFCAs) and identified sources that increase their vulnerability to anxiety. Black Feminist Thought, with sub-tenets of intersectionality and outsider within status, was used as the theoretical foundation to examine the lives of the BFCAs. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this qualitative study addressed the question: What sociocultural factors affect anxiety in Black female college athletes? Nine Black female college athletes from an NCAA Division I program agreed to participate in this study. Regarding the sources of anxiety, four themes emerged: regimented schedule (subthemes: lack of freedom, decreased choices, and external locus), forced community (subthemes: isolation and team conflict), emphasis on athletics (subthemes: coaching pressures, training pressures, and academic pressures) and navigating marginalization (subthemes: gender and racial stereotypes and gender and racial inequality). Two unexpected themes also materialized: family support and suggested solutions (subthemes: representation and communication). The findings and analysis were based on the data collected and the theoretical lens. The results suggest the need for culturally appropriate interventions to support this specific college athlete population.

Introduction

College students are susceptible to increased levels of anxiety, with over 50% experiencing overwhelming anxiety during their college years (Wilkerson et al., 2022). These stresses are compounded for college athletes as they face additional pressures due to their athletic obligations (Holden et al., 2019). Approximately, 45% of college student-athletes report symptoms of anxiety outside the normal ranges (Drew & Matthews, 2019). Addressing elevated anxiety levels is crucial in the college athletic population as it leads to deteriorating physical and mental conditions, including risky behavior, depression, substance abuse, insomnia, and suicide (Junge & Feddermann-Demont, 2016; NCAA Sports Institute, 2020).

Until 2021, research on college athletes predominantly examined anxiety's influence on sports performance and well-being, with a bias toward Caucasian student-athletes (NCAA Sports Institute, 2020; Watson, 2016). However, as mental health challenges are more prevalent among athletes of color due to the added burden of racial and gender stressors (Minority Stress), this underrepresentation of racially diverse athletes in literature creates a notable void in applying research outcomes to address their unique needs (Senne, 2016).

Black female college athletes (BFCAs) occupy a prominent position within the racially diverse athletic population that is unfortunately underrepresented in research efforts aimed at addressing mental health issues (Cooper et al., 2020). These athletes face a unique set of challenges, being vulnerable not only to academic and athletic stressors but also to the psychological strain resulting from racial and gender isolation and discrimination (Duncan, 2015; Mays et al., 2016). As a result, BFCAs are more susceptible to elevated levels of anxiety, making it imperative to focus on understanding and mitigating their mental health concerns to ensure their overall well-being and success.

Purpose Statement

Responding to the identified research gap, our study employed a qualitative approach to purposefully explore the nuanced experiences of BFCAs in the context of both their academic and athletic pursuits. The primary objective was to discern the sociocultural factors that contributed significantly to their heightened vulnerability to anxiety. The research comprehensively delved into the intricate web of factors that influenced anxiety levels within this specific demographic, encompassing, but not confined to, academic pressures, athletic performance expectations, racial and gender-related stressors, and the profound impact of societal perceptions.

The examination of sociocultural determinants affecting anxiety in BFCAs is imperative as it serves as a linchpin, to not only guide the development of precision-targeted interventions aimed at ameliorating poor mental well-being in this cohort but also serve as a catalyst to rectify disparities, optimize both academic and athletic prowess, nurture inclusivity, and fortify a robust support system for this often marginalized yet resilient group of student-athletes. Ultimately, the consequential findings of this research are poised to instigate transformative shifts within the edu-

cational landscape of universities, endowing diverse student-athletes with comprehensive resources to not just succeed but to excel both academically and athletically.

This study was guided by the following research question:

RQ1: What are the sociocultural factors that affect anxiety in Black female college athletes?

To address this question, we reviewed the current research on anxiety and college student-athletes, and the current literature on Black female college athletes' lived experiences.

Literature Review

College Athletes are at Increased Risk of Mental Health Distress (Anxiety)

Collegiate student-athletes navigate a complex web of stress, stemming from heightened demands in athletic participation, increased academic pressures, family and coach expectations, commercialized college athletics, and a strong athletic identity (Dalton & Hammen, 2018; Drew & Matthews, 2019; Parker et al., 2021; Wolanin et al., 2016). Moreover, college athletes face a myriad of stressors, including managing academic and athletic responsibilities, balancing time for studying and training, handling challenges related to travel and competition, coping with injuries, dealing with pressure to win, managing conflicts with coaches and teammates, and navigating social isolation and burnout (Johnson & Ivarsson, 2011). These distinctive factors in college athletes' lived experiences contribute to elevated rates of mental exhaustion, anxiety, and depression within this population (NCAA Sport Science Institute, 2020; Watson, 2016). Eighty percent of college athletes feel overwhelmed by the combination of academic responsibilities and demanding college athletics, leading to increased anxiety and compromised overall well-being (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005; Davoren & Hwang, 2014). The consequences are alarming, as heightened anxiety among college student-athletes leads to deteriorating physical and mental health, including risky behavior, depression, substance abuse, insomnia, and increased suicide risk (Junge & Feddermann-Demont, 2016). Hence, there have been efforts by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to reduce anxiety levels and improve mental health in college-level student-athletes. The formation of the NCAA's initiatives, such as the mental health toolkit, task force, and summit, reflects their commitment to addressing mental health issues in college athletes (Kroshus et al., 2023). However, despite the 2021 NCAA summit highlighting mental health needs in NCAA athletes of color, there remains a gap in addressing the specific mental health needs faced by BFCAs (Kroshus et al., 2023).

The Marginalization of the Black Woman and the Black Female Athlete

Black women in the United States face marginalization based on sexism and racism positioning them as outsiders in sociocultural spaces (Cooper & Newton, 2021; Rollins, 1985). These issues are systemic and entrenched in education, religion, politics, and broader culture (Carter-Francique, 2018). Given that Black women are dis-

proportionately affected by marginalization in society and serve as outsiders within their social context, it is not surprising that their mental well-being is negatively impacted. Perry et al. (2013) suggested racial and gender discrimination elevate the risk of poor health and well-being by increasing vulnerability to stressors (Perry et al., 2013). Increased anxiety levels, isolation, depression, and being silenced are often the results of marginalization (Perry et al., 2013). Yoder & Aniakudo (1997), examined African American female firefighters' social interactions in the workplace that led to the feeling of exclusion and isolation (outsiders within). Yoder & Aniakudo (1997) suggested African American female firefighters faced intertwined race and gender marginalization, experiencing issues like insufficient instructions, coworker hostility, silence, close supervision, lack of support, and stereotyping. This illustrates how Black women may experience exclusion and isolation despite being part of a social group, owing to inherent marginalization. As sports reflect broader societal issues, systemic challenges impacting Black women are also prevalent and amplified within the athletic realm (Cooper & Newton, 2021).

BFCAs experience gender and racial marginalization within sports, akin to Black women in society (Simien et al, 2019). For instance, BFCAs are often gender-specifically stereotyped as overly sexual, and racially stereotyped as unintelligent both on and off the court (Withycombe, 2011). The impact of this marginalization on the overall mental well-being of BFCAs cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, underrepresented women, including BFCAs, face significant disparities in NCAA athletic participation compared to White women (NCAA Sport Science Institute, 2020; Senne, 2016). White women comprise 30% of players, while Black women constitute only 5%, highlighting the underrepresentation of women of color (Norwood, 2019). Therefore, this exposes BFCAs to the outsider within phenomenon in their sports.

Black Female College Athletes (BFCAs), Minority Stress and Anxiety

BFCAs experience higher anxiety levels compared to their counterparts due to college athlete stressors and gender/racial marginalization, known as Minority Stress (Kroshus et al., 2023; Parker et al., 2021; Sadberry & Mobley, 2013; Williams, 2018).

Minority Stress is the psychological discomfort experienced by marginalized groups due to racial isolation and discrimination (Williams, 2018). BFCAs are susceptible to minority stress as this population embodies the unique intersectional nature of being fully woman and fully Black (Bernhard, 2014). College athletes experiencing minority stress will display self-segregation, reluctance to form relationships, feelings of disrespect, higher anxiety and depressive symptoms, and interpersonal issues (Sadberry & Mobley, 2013). Therefore, BFCAs are at higher risk of anxiety symptoms due to compounding stress as college athletes and the intersectional effects of racism and sexism (Carter-Francique, 2013). Considering the impact of this specific stress it is vital to understand anxiety origins and design effective interventions in this population.

Theoretical Framework

The lived experiences of BFCAs are characterized by racism, sexism, and classism which position them as outsiders in sociocultural spaces (Carter-Francique, 2013). Consequently, this has led to a constant state of stress, isolation, and anxiety (Collins, 1986). Mainstream sociological theories often marginalize BFCA's perspectives however, few critical scholars advocate the use of emic theories to understand their lived experiences (Ofoegbu, 2022; Simien et al., 2019).

A prominent Black feminist epistemology referred to as Black Feminist Thought (BFT) posits that Black women possess a unique consciousness to understand their sociocultural position (Keaton, 2022). BFT, conceptualized by Patricia Hill-Collins (1989), comprises three themes for the comprehensive examination of Black women's experiences in a broader social context. BFT themes postulate historical and material conditions shape Black women's perception of their social world, these ideas are commonly shared among other Black women, and their identities are expressed through the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, region, and age (Collins, 1989). These themes apply to BFCAs as they primarily identify as Black women before their athletic status.

Employing the BFT themes is pivotal for engaging with and understanding BFCAs, as this framework delved into their interpretations and perceptions of the athletic social sphere where they exist as outsiders within (Collins, 1986). Black women possess a unique understanding of their position within these social realms. Ransby (2003) underscores how outsiders possess an observant perspective but remain on the periphery of authentic belonging within the social context. For instance, Black women tending to White families in the mid-20th century were viewed as family by their employers, yet their awareness of incomplete acceptance compelled them to navigate their role cautiously as outsiders (Rollins, 1985). Similarly, BFCAs approach their collegiate athletic roles with similar vigilance, mirroring the cited example. Consequently, the BFT framework stood as an apt choice for studying this demographic, comprehensively addressing their marginalized encounters and the social inequities that amplify feelings of isolation and anxiety (Collins, 1989).

Finally, several scholars, such as Brunening et al. (2005), Carter and Hart (2010), Carter-Francique (2013), Ogunrinde (2022), and Smith (2000), have adeptly applied the BFT framework to comprehensively explore the experiences of Black women in the realm of sports. For instance, Ogunrinde (2022) employed BFT as a methodological framework to gain a profound socioecological insight into the participation of Black girls in sports. This research delved into the perspectives of Black girls, utilizing their voices and key dimensions of BFT to elucidate the intricate dynamics of sports as an institutional space. The collective efforts of these scholars underscore the significance of employing a BFT lens to deepen our understanding of the complex intersectionality of race, gender, and sports experiences for Black women and girls (Collins, 1986).

Intersectionality

Scholars in the fields of management and social psychology have highlighted the experiences of Black women as they navigate a complex social world entangled in multiple systems of marginalization (Keaton, 2022). Synthesized by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality examines how Black women experience marginalization at the intersections of race, gender, and other social identities like class (Dhamoon, 2015; Keaton, 2022). Intersectionality also allows academic understanding of Black women's lived experiences in the context of multiple systems of oppression (Keaton, 2022). The term "intersectionality" originates from critical legal studies, where Black women faced challenges in winning legal cases based solely on gender or race discrimination, revealing the complexity of their identities (Crenshaw, 1989).

Sport management researchers commonly utilize the intersectionality framework as a theoretical guide for critical inquiry, shaping the study, interview questions, and analysis (McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). However, Collin and Bilge (2020) suggest intersectionality serves not only as a critical inquiry tool but also as a critical praxis for social problem-solving. Therefore, this research aligns with Collins and Bilge's (2020) perspective as it employed intersectionality to understand sociocultural factors impacting anxiety in BFCAs (Critical Inquiry) and to develop culturally appropriate interventions for this population (Critical Praxis).

Method

The study utilized an interpretative phenomenological approach (van Manen, 2017) to understand BFCA's lived experiences and the social-cultural factors influencing their anxiety. To grasp the intricate and subjective nature of anxiety, influenced by individual and societal factors like race and gender (Harris & Molock, 2000), an interpretive phenomenological methodology was essential (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Aligning with the purpose of interpretive phenomenological research, questions were crafted to explore how individuals understood and gave meaning to their experiences in their world (Smith et al., 2009). Interview questions focused on the participants' experiences and how they experienced them (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Given the multifaceted and interconnectedness of the factors shaping the well-being of BFCAs, utilizing narratives was a beneficial technique to understand their experiences and this socio-ecological model offers insightful analysis into understanding this population.

Figure 1.
Socioecological Model
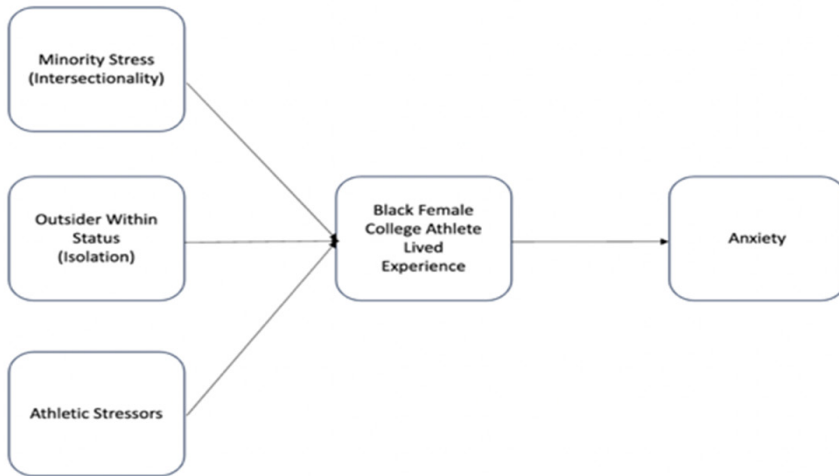
Participants

Post Institutional Review Board approval, participants were purposefully select-ed for their NCAA Division I college sports involvement. Eligibility criteria required English proficiency and to be over the age of 18. Furthermore, findings are limited to these participants and may not represent the entire population.

Convenient sampling was the most effective recruitment method, capitalizing on interested individuals' availability (Berg, 2001). Snowball sampling was further utilized to optimize participant recruitment (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Twelve individuals expressed interest however, only nine agreed to be inter-viewed. Participants were from a Predominantly White Division I Institution in the Southern United States. All nine participants received a cover letter, consent form, and demographic questionnaire via Qualtrics online survey. After the interviews were conducted, participants were offered compensation in the form of a $10 Ama-zon or Target gift card, based on their individual preferences.

Instruments and Procedure

Data was collected via an online demographic questionnaire, which took ap-proximately 10 minutes to complete, as well as a 45-minute video and audio-re-corded interview conducted on Microsoft Teams. The demographic questionnaire covered athletic details (team membership, classification) and personal information (hometown, ethnicity, socioeconomic status).

Semi-structured interviews were utilized to elicit rich and in-depth data, allow-ing participants to freely narrate their experiences without predetermined answers. This format also facilitated the comparison of responses to identify common themes and patterns (Minichiello et al., 1999; Morse & Field, 1995).

Table 1.
Participants Demographics

Pseudonyms	Age	Scholastic Classification	Sport	College Major	Racial / Ethnic Background
Danea	20	Sophomore	Soccer	Biomedical Engineering	African American (Black)
Danah	23	Graduate Student	Soccer	Finance	African American (Black)
Hanna	21	Sophomore	Soccer	Marketing	African American (Black)
Lydia	19	Sophomore	Soccer	Kinesiology	African American (Black)
Angela	22	Senior	Volleyball	Kinesiology	African American (Black)
Leslie	20	Sophomore	Basketball	Media Production	African American (Black)
Eliza	19	Freshman	Swimming & Diving	Technology Management	African American (Biracial Black & White)
Madina	26	Graduate Student	Basketball	Human Resources	African (Black)
Vicki	22	Senior	Volleyball	Sports Administration	African American (Black)

Note: Table 1 displays relevant participant background information, including sport, age, college major, and racial & ethnic backgrounds.

The interview incorporated five sections: (1) experiences, (2) anxiety sources (athletics, academics, marginalization), (3) impact and symptoms of anxiety, (4) coping strategies (personal and university support), and (5) suggested improvements.

Positionality

As the authors are people of diverse backgrounds who have experienced marginalization, we approached researching personal narratives of this population with attentiveness to our positionality, avoiding projecting our own experiences onto the interviewee's responses, as emphasized by Solórzano and Yosso (2002). Reflective bracketing was employed as part of the interpretive phenomenology research process to acknowledge and identify our personal experiences and responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This deliberate approach mitigated potential bias and minimized the entanglement of researchers' beliefs with participants' responses, as advocated by Patton (2015).

Interview transcriptions were revisited and validated with participants, following the recommendations of Ravitch & Mittenfelner-Carl (2016), ensuring clarity, accuracy, representation, and saturation of the data. To enhance study credibility, experts were consulted on theory application, methodology, data interpretation, and analysis, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018). This collaborative effort ensured a robust and informed research process.

Data Analysis

This study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) with a focus on interpretation, hermeneutics, and ideography as core principles (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). IPA aims to illuminate an individual's lived narrative and uncover shared meanings between the scholar and the participant (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). With an IPA approach, the researcher interprets the significance of lived experiences within a sociocultural context (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Ideographical aspects of IPA emphasize closely observing participants' specific behaviors and circumstances, guiding researchers on data inquiry (Keaton, 2022; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutic aspects of IPA interpret and understand communication forms like written and spoken language, considering the context's influence on interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

IPA also facilitated the application of criterion purposeful sampling. By employing this sampling method, the researchers were able to select participants who were deemed most informative for the study (Moser & Korjsten, 2018). Finally, IPA allowed the researchers to identify areas that support the theoretical framework (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Interview data were transcribed and analyzed concurrently, facilitating a thorough examination of all nine transcripts to extract key data, which were coded and developed into meaningful thematic categories. Data collection continued until saturation, indicating closure as no new information emerged. Data analysis followed established methods from previous research (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Keaton, 2022; Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 1997).

Table 2.
Five Stages of the Analytical Process

Stages of Data Analysis	
Stages	**Tasks Completed**
1. Immersion	Organized data into texts. Iterative reading of texts. Preliminary interpretation of the text to facilitate coding.
2. Understanding	Identified participants construct. Coding of data.
3. Abstraction	Identified researcher constructs. Grouped researchers construct into sub-themes.
4. Synthesis and theme development	Grouped sub-themes into themes.
4. Illumination and Illustration of phenomena	Linked stories and literature to themes and sub-themes.

There were five stages in the analysis process. See Table 2. for a summation of each stage.

Stage One: Immersion

In phenomenological research, immersion involves deeply engaging with the participant's text to understand its meaning and facilitate interpretation (van Manen, 1997). The researchers carefully listened to the interview recordings multiple times to transcribe the participants' statements accurately. After constructing each transcript, all interview transcripts were extensively read and re-read, while simultaneously listening to the audio recordings to minimize errors and promote reflection during analysis. Subsequently, this enhanced familiarity and prompted the development of initial interpretations for the coding process. Finally, reflective notes were document-ed, capturing initial thoughts, notable comments, challenges to preconceived ideas, bold expressions, and participants' emotions. This aided a smooth interpretive process, fostering deeper understanding and analysis.

Stage Two: Understanding

To comprehend participants' information introspective "why" questions were implemented to explore underlying motives and dynamics. For instance, researchers pondered why athletes dedicated themselves to a sport that results in their mental distress. These inquiries aimed to unravel deeper insights into the complexities of their experiences.

As researchers grappled with these thought-provoking questions, they engaged

in introspection, while exploring the significance of participants' lived experiences. Frameworks like Black Feminist Thought, intersectionality, idiocrasy, and aspects of interpretative phenomenology were used to uncover nuanced meanings and shed light on intricate dynamics in participants' narratives.

Introspection prompted coding each participant's narratives. This consisted of validating and reviewing every transcript and code with each respective participant for clarity and accuracy (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This iterative process delved deeper into participants' experiences and provided the researchers with a comprehensive understanding that was essential for generating meaningful findings relevant to the research. This approach led to saturation as redundant information emerged, signifying a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.

The coding process explored shared and distinct experiences among participants. Individual codes were assigned to each participant, ensuring a focused understanding of their unique stories.

Stage Three: Abstraction

The interpretation of each interview transcript was utilized to create a composite dataset, where relevant and similar constructs were grouped together. This systematic grouping of data enabled the researchers to address the principal research question effectively.

During the initial round of coding, concept codes such as sports-related issues, intersectionality, and descriptive comments that influenced anxiety levels were applied. This process enabled the researchers to engage in abstraction by organizing similar codes and creating second-level codes, as outlined by Smith et al. (2009).

At the conclusion of this stage, all pertinent texts were categorized under their respective constructs within each sub-group, contributing to the answering of the principal research question.

Stage Four: Synthesis and Theme Development.

Themes resulted from cumulative actions during the initial three analytical steps. Similar constructs were grouped into subthemes, then further categorized into major themes addressing the research question. When identifying the essential nature of a theme, the objective was to identify the defining characteristics that encapsulated a particular phenomenon (van Manen, 1997). The iterative process refined themes and sub-themes, elucidating insights from data analysis. This approach revealed deeper meanings participants couldn't directly express due to the complex nature of the study.

Stage Five: Illumination and Illustration of Phenomena

Existing literature was thoroughly examined to validate and reinforce interpretations from the participants' narratives, bolstering the development of themes and subthemes and providing scientific credibility to sources of anxiety experienced by each participant.

Findings

Based on the transcribed and coded data, the analysis revealed the emergence of four major themes that shed light on the sources of anxiety. These themes encompassed the participants' experiences with a regimented schedule, the sense of being part of a forced community, the weight placed on athletics, and the challenges of navigating marginalization. Additionally, two additional themes emerged, namely family support and suggested solutions, providing further insights into the participants' experiences. Refer to Figure 2. for a summation.

Figure 2.
Flowchart of major themes and subthemes.
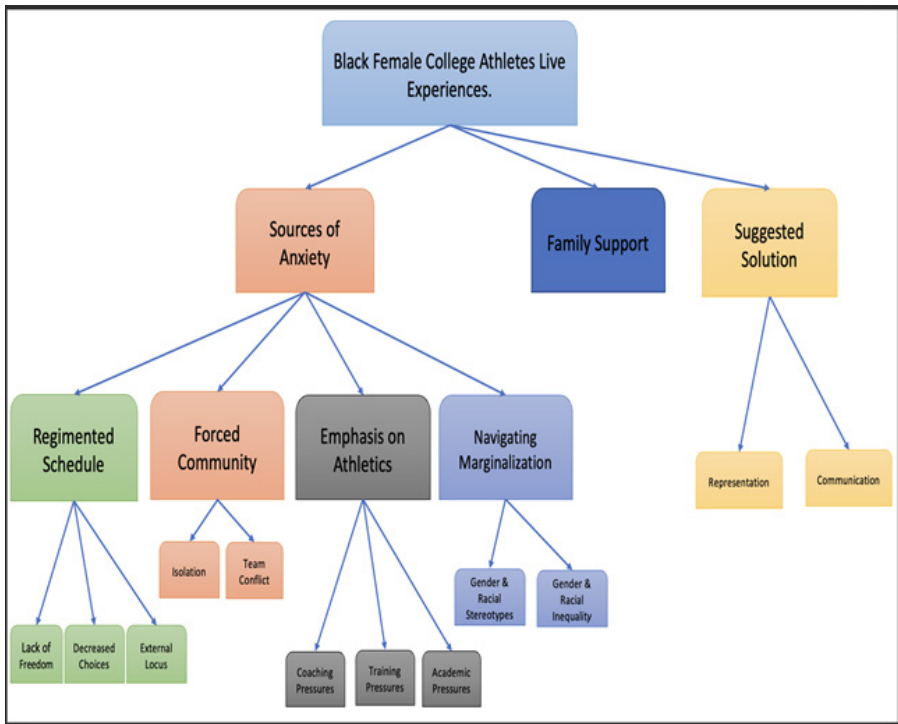
Regimented Schedule

All nine participants shared a common factor: a strict and inflexible daily routine that allowed minimal deviation.

Danah describes a typical day as a college student-athlete.

> I get up at 6:30am. If we had to be at practice at 7:15, I would probably pull up around like, 7:05 then, we start practice. Practice lasts for a couple of hours. After practice, we have weight training which is for about an hour. When we are done, I probably go home, shower, and then come back to do rehab for an hour and a half. After that, I go home eat, and then go to class

from 6:00 to 9:00 PM. I often do my homework during class. After class, I eat and go to sleep.

All nine participants echoed similar stories when questioned about a typical day as a college athlete demonstrating a regimented schedule. This theme was further delineated into three subthemes: lack of freedom, decreased ability to make choices, and an external locus of control. These factors contributed to a pervasive sense of anxiety experienced by this population.

Lack of Freedom

Hanna openly discussed her limitations in pursuing activities beyond athletics and academic obligations.

> I just sometimes don't like all the sacrifices I have to make to play the sport socially and physically. You must sacrifice so much time that you could be spending with others and doing things that could benefit you.

Hanna also shared how the time constraints and limited opportunities to pursue other internships and social endeavors resulted in feelings of unhappiness and fear of missing out.

> I might have to sacrifice not being able to participate in this program (intern program) because I must practice at a certain time. Also, little things that I won't be a part of, like hanging out and making memories with my friends, give me, really big FOMO (fear of missing out).

Gupta and Sharma (2021) define fear of missing out (FOMO) as apprehension about others having rewarding experiences, leading to symptoms like sleep deprivation, diminished life competency, emotional tension, negative physical effects, and heightened anxiety. Participants consistently reported the lack of freedom resulting from athletic and academic requirements restricted their participation in other activities and contributed to FOMO, highlighting the interconnectedness between lack of freedom and anxiety.

Decreased Choices

Participants expressed restricted personal choices due to potential consequences, limiting their ability to benefit themselves or contribute to societal changes.

Angela shared her experience of being removed from the team after participating in social justice marches.

> I was getting really involved in social justice stuff so after our first march, he brought me into his office and I was like, "OK, what's up?" [He replied] "Hey, some of the things you're doing off the court need to come to a halt. You need to focus more on the court." So, I was like "dang." Here's how I knew he was serious because two girls had gotten kicked off our teams for academic reasons.

Angela's decision to engage in an activity other than athletics ultimately led to her dismissal from the team.

Participants were further questioned about the impact on their mental well-being resulting from the limited ability to make choices freely.

Angela further expressed how these restricted choices had a significant impact on her personal relationships, stating "I think it got into my personal relationships, my insecurities, and my frustrations were thrown onto the other person. it definitely made me more anxious." Yearwood (2018) found college athletes constrained daily routines, including balancing practices, workouts, classes, meals, and sleep, limit their personal time and contribute to feelings of confinement and frustration. This restriction on independent decision-making significantly influences their anxiety levels.

External Locus of Control

Rotter (1966) defines locus of control as the extent to which individuals perceive outcomes as influenced by internal or external factors, with external locus of control indicating reliance on external forces beyond one's control. A correlation exists between locus of control and anxiety, particularly when rewards are perceived to be contingent upon external factors (Watson, 2016). As college athletes' structured schedules are beyond their control, anxiety may be prevalent.

This relationship is particularly salient for BFCAs as Foster (2003) suggested heightened scrutiny and control of this population by authority figures. BFCAs face constant monitoring and regulation through surveillance mechanisms rooted in historical power structures (Foster, 2003).

Foster (2003) highlighted the negative impact of control and surveillance on BFCA's well-being which led to increased stress, anxiety, and diminished agency. Danah's account revealed the presence of pressure to impress her coach, which subsequently contributed to heightened feelings of anxiety.

> I feel the pressure always feeling like, you're trying to impress somebody, whether you play little minutes, whether you're injured, whether you are a starter, you play 90 minutes. It feels like you are working out to please somebody else, and that's huge pressure.

Participants' responses indicated when events often extend beyond their control, it results in elevated levels of anxiety.

Forced Community

Four of the nine participants felt coerced into forming relationships within the team, creating a false sense of community. Forced community in this study referred to intentionally encouraging friendships among teammates by the coaching staff and athletic department to foster unity. While having camaraderie amongst teammates, alleviates loneliness for the individual athlete (Miller & Kerr, 2002), this overlooks the BFCA's experiences.

Hanah shared an unsuccessful coaching staff attempt to coerce teammate relationships for camaraderie.

> There are so many girls that I feel like I was forced to be friends with but if I saw them walking down the street and had one conversation with them, I would never talk to them again just because we don't have anything in common.

In an attempt to foster social community, athletics overlooks individual competitiveness, diverse social ideologies, and racial backgrounds.

Participants expressed competition for positions, personal ideologies, and racial identity created a disconnect with their Caucasian teammates. Danah discussed how the presence of varying ideologies among teammates contributed to the sense of forced community within the team dynamics stating, "We disagree on huge things like kneeling for the anthem and more recently the COVID vaccine mandate. You're forced into disregarding things that you wouldn't in the real world." While the idea of building community amongst teammates fosters camaraderie and enhances social development, inorganic bonds lead to isolation, conflict, and anxiety among participants. The theme of forced community was further divided into two subthemes: isolation and team conflict.

Isolation

BFCAs exhibit a distinctive quality characterized by their experience of an "outsider within" status, implying they are not regarded as authentic members within their social spheres. This condition often results in the suppression of their voices, fostering emotions of alienation and isolation, as noted by scholars such as Rollins (1985) and Bruening et al. (2005). Participants, reports of isolation within their sporting context contributed to loneliness and heightened anxiety levels. Hanna shared her experiences of feeling alienated by the coaching staff.

> I am literally one of the kindest people on this team, and they framed me to be a person that I wasn't, attacking my character. I felt so unvalued, mistreated, and unheard, and it was with everything that I did. They always put someone else's thoughts and beliefs about me over me instead of having conversations.

The experience of feeling alienated and isolated was shown to be a significant factor contributing to heightened anxiety levels.

Team Conflict

Negotiating interpersonal conflicts with coaches and teammates emerges as a notable factor leading to increased anxiety levels among college athletes. In her account, Lydia brought attention to instances of team conflicts that emerged during her freshman year, stemming from violations of COVID-19 protocols. These violations led to strained relationships among both upperclassmen and incoming athletes. The aftermath of these conflicts had a palpable impact on Lydia, leading to increased personal unrest and heightened levels of anxiety.

> Freshman year, there were a lot of conflicts due to COVID protocol violations, between the whole freshman class against everyone else, however, it was a few girls that were causing problems. Because we were new the other girls didn't know to separate us, and it became everyone versus the freshman. That wasn't fun and made it very tense sometimes.
>
> I didn't know if being on the team was for me, very early on due to the conflict environment.

Participants' feedback revealed a strong link between team conflicts, increased anxiety levels, and a tendency to withdraw and isolate oneself. While camaraderie and a sense of family can be fostered through prolonged interactions with like-minded individuals, it is crucial to recognize that mistrust, conflicts, and feelings of isolation can also arise, intensifying vulnerability to anxiety.

Emphasis on Athletics

Six of the nine participants emphasized the intense athletic focus and associated pressures from coaches, training commitments, and the struggle to balance academic responsibilities. The emphasis on athletics objectives set by management often overshadowed the personal goals of the athletes. Angela noted how college athletics is treated as a business, with management primarily concerned about athlete performance, saying, "College athletics is a business, they don't care about your mental well-being, but more so your physical. Because it's about, dollar signs, how I would perform is how my coach gets paid. And there's so much pressure." Each participant's response highlighted the detrimental effects of the business nature of college athletics on their mental health, resulting in increased anxiety. The subthemes of coaching pressures, training pressures, and academic pressures further contributed to this dynamic.

Coaching Pressures

Elevated performance expectations from coaches exert heightened pressure on athletes, detrimentally impacting their well-being. Vicki shared her challenges with performance pressures and elevated expectations from coaches.

> I understand that it's the coach's job, to win. If they don't win, they are gonna get fired. So, you are basically playing for them to get paid. However, you feel like they don't care about you and your well-being and all they want is perfection. If you make mistakes, they are gonna talk to you in a degrading way.

Participants noted how coaches' financial incentives linked to athletes' performance exert undue pressure on the coaches, which is then transferred to the athletes, contributing to heightened anxiety levels.

Training Pressures

College athletics incorporate practice, training, and recovery sessions to enhance athlete skills, readiness, and performance under the coaches' assessment. However, the business-oriented nature of college sports has resulted in intensified and prolonged training regimens.

Madina discussed the detrimental effects of the demanding and lengthy basketball training schedule on her well-being.

> We wake up early in the morning, we have weight room, meetings, and film, where they talk about you. You then have to update them on your progression. After that, you have to practice for 3 hours. This happens four

days a week except for game weeks. You feel like you spend all of your days doing the same things, and you don't have time to relax. It's stressful because you're trying to meet your expectations even when you are tired and your body feels down like you didn't have enough sleep. So, it's always stressful.

Prolonged training negatively affected participants' well-being, elevating stress and anxiety levels significantly.

Academic Pressures

Navigating the balance between academics and athletics is vital for college athletes. However, intensified academic pressures and constrained planning time contribute to overwhelming stress levels (Brown, 2016; Stokowski et al., 2019). Eliza discussed the challenge of balancing academic requirements and her swimming career, emphasizing the difficulties she faced, saying, "During the season I'm pretty stressed with making sure I can finish my schoolwork, especially if we have swimming meets or travel." Eliza further provided insights into the psychological effects of balancing academic and athletic demands.

I'm stressed with school and swimming. There was a point during swim season where I felt there was nothing that would help. I don't have an outlet for my stress because I have to deal with school that I'm not the best at and then I have to also deal with swimming.

Participants indicated they experienced significant distress because of the academic demands, which subsequently affected their overall well-being.

Navigating Marginalization

BFCAs lived experiences are marred by racial oppression, gender inequities, and marginalized experiences from perceived negative stereotypes (Carter-Francique, 2013). Marginalization was explored through two subthemes: Gender and Racial Stereotypes and Gender and Racial Inequality.

Gender and Racial Stereotypes

Stereotypes are commonly held beliefs about group characteristics, disregarding individual variations (Kauer & Krane, 2006). Stereotypes are used to distinguish and generalize across groups (Kauer & Krane, 2006). Stereotypes based on race, gender, and athletic status marginalize BFCAs, undermining their achievements and social integration, while contributing to higher rates of anxiety and depressive symptoms (Carter-Francique, 2013; Kauer & Krane, 2006). BFCAs face gender stereotypes portraying them as emotionally unstable and fragile, while racial stereotypes label them as aggressive, lacking emotions, and lower in intelligence (Ofoegbu, 2022; Simien et al., 2019).

On three distinct occasions, Angela shared notable experiences on gender and racial stereotypes. She recounted an incident where her coach anticipated her to exhibit vulnerability and plead to remain on the volleyball team based on her gender,

saying, "I'll never forget in the meeting when he kicked me off, he said, 'You never cried even though I was mean to you.' I was like, 'what do you want me to cry?' He said other girls cry when things go wrong. Angela reported that she engaged in a conversation with her volleyball coach about the coach's viewpoints regarding Black athletes and came to a dishearten realization on how Black athletes are seen.

> My coaches made me realize, how people see Black athletes. When he describes Black players, he would say, they're very athletic and jump high, whereas he describes White players as technically sound, with strong setup skills, and a very high IQ level.

Finally, she emphasized the profound personal repercussions of perceived stereotypes on Black female volleyball players, underscoring the considerable disrespect she encountered, stating, "I honestly feel disrespected. All the hard work I put into improving my skill set to better my IQ level doesn't matter." Participants' responses indicated how generalizations based on their Black and female identities disregarded their individuality, leading to increased levels of insecurity and anxiety.

Gender & Racial Inequality.

Participants indicated they encountered instances of racial and gender inequality throughout their playing careers. The combination of these disparities alongside athletic pressures heightened their vulnerability to anxiety. Angela noted gender disparities in Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) advertising deals, with male athletes often receiving greater opportunities despite lesser accomplishments than their female counterparts. She stated, "He doesn't even necessarily play, but he is getting a deal with Uber, but we haven't even gotten a deal yet and we're all-conference." Leslie highlighted the unequal viewership between the women's basketball team and other sports teams, such as men's basketball, volleyball, and soccer, which received more attention from the university and administration.

> We don't get the support we should, like the men's basketball team. I feel more people go to the volleyball girls because they're mostly Caucasian. You come to our games you barely see anyone. You think about that as a Black female like, do they really care for us, or do we matter as well?

Participants report consistently facing gender and racial disparities, resulting in heightened anxiety levels.

Family Support

Family support emerged as a pivotal coping mechanism for all nine participants in managing pressures, stress, and anxiety. Eliza highlighted the significance her family plays in alleviating feelings of homesickness and isolation.

> My mom, my dad, and my brother are my biggest supporters. My mom is my loudest supporter and she's always there for my ups and downs. Although she might not be in the stands, due to live streaming it is nice to know that I still have support across the country.

Lydia echoed similar sentiments regarding the support she receives from her family, saying, "We basically talk for hours if I need it. When I'm feeling a little stressed

out, they let me know that I am still a priority in their lives." Participants' responses emphasized the crucial role of family support in enhancing their mental well-being.

Suggested Solutions

Four participants provided recommendations to improve the well-being and climate of college athletics for Black female athletes, focusing on representation and communication.

Representation

Participants emphasized the need for Black women representation in coaching and administration to better understand and address their unique challenges. Hanna emphasized the importance of having relatable individuals who share her racial and gender identity as a BFCA. She said, "I just wish there was somebody in the position who looked like me and could fully understand the stuff that I go through instead of White people trying to tell me how to live my Black life." Participants' responses indicate increased representation in coaching and athletic administration is crucial for improving the environment and conditions for BFCAs.

Communication

Enhanced communication between administrators, coaches, and athletes is recommended to address training demands, academic expectations, and psychological challenges, thereby promoting the well-being of BFCAs. Eliza highlighted the importance of coaches' improved communication for enhancing athletes' well-being and fostering understanding of their unique challenges saying, "I think there is a lack of communication, if there was more communication between coaches and athletes, I think it probably help with our mental health." Respondents emphasized the significance of improved communication among coaching staff, athletic administration, and athletes regarding their well-being, with appropriate responses to meet their needs, ultimately enhancing the experiences of BFCAs.

Discussion

Amid the NCAA's emphasis on enhancing mental health for college athletes and the growing recognition of how race and gender impact their well-being, the imperative to prioritize mental well-being within BFCAs should align with a comprehensive understanding of their unique mental health experiences. Participants' accounts unveiled the presence of regimented schedules characterized by restricted autonomy, limited options, and external demands. Additionally, the heightened emphasis on athletics, encompassing coaching, training, and academic pressures, was evident. While these challenges are pertinent to college athletes broadly, a nuanced understanding of the historical backdrop in which Black women have traditionally contended with time constraints imposed by external factors can assist administrators in grasping their elevated anxiety response to structured schedules. This heightened awareness acknowledges the unique historical and societal pressures that have

shaped the experiences of Black women, offering a more insightful perspective on the complexities of managing time and expectations within the framework of collegiate athletics. This understanding underscores their need for increased autonomy over their time management. Hence, the applicability of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as an analytical tool for college athletic administrators in comprehending anxiety within this cohort becomes more apparent. BFT posited the perceptions of Black women concerning their social environment are intricately molded by historical and material circumstances (Collins, 1989). In this study, BFT notably facilitated a profound grasp of the historical underpinnings linking these themes to an external locus of control and participant mistrust, consequently exacerbating anxiety levels. O'Connor's (2002) work suggests that historically, racism and gender-based oppression have constrained Black women's autonomy and choices, impacted their societal experiences, and ultimately led to mental health issues and institutional mistrust. Consequently, through the lens of BFT and the exploration of these thematic insights, it becomes clear why BFCAs encounter heightened anxiety in situations that curtail their agency. The perspectives shared by participants underscore a gap in the integration of mental health initiatives tailored to this group and in their interactions with athletic staff. Enhancing their autonomy is of paramount importance for mitigating the anxiety stemming from the existing collegiate athletic landscape for this population.

The theme of forced community, marked by conflicts among teammates and feelings of isolation, substantiates the relevance of the outsider within status framework. Participants described pressure to forge connections with teammates, even with differing viewpoints, led to conflicts, isolation, and a sense of exclusion ultimately impacting their anxiety levels. This finding resonates with prior research, such as Rollins (1985), who proposes Black women have consistently confronted an outsider status within their social contexts, marginalized and positioned at the margins of power structures. This marginalization has fostered feelings of isolation, heightened anxiety, and an inclination toward depression among these individuals (Rollins, 1985). Similar trends surfaced in our investigation, indicating the absence of purposeful community-building efforts has adverse effects on the well-being of Black female college athletes. Armed with this awareness, college sports administrators should prioritize establishing secure environments within the existing framework that facilitate natural community formation among this group.

The theme of navigating marginalization underscores the significance and necessity of incorporating critical inquiry within the intersectional framework when investigating the lived experiences of Black women. By applying critical inquiry within the intersectionality framework, this study unveiled that BFCAs grappled with intersectional marginalization, resulting in elevated anxiety levels. Participants consistently revealed a noticeable contrast in the favorable treatment and assistance provided by both the athletic department and the wider university environment to predominantly Caucasian and male-dominated sports, while inadvertently neglecting the needs of sports where BFCA's are dominant. Furthermore, this theme resonates with prior research. Notably, in a study by Sadberry & Mobley (2013) exploring

sociocultural and mental health adaptation among BFCAs, it was revealed how these very gender and racial stressors (i.e., intersectionality) heightened the likelihood of anxiety symptoms. Administrators aiming to enhance mental health support for BFCAs must recognize the inadvertent potential for further marginalization. Their intent to connect with these women individually should acknowledge the intersecting influences of race and gender on their lived experiences.

The identification of the family support theme as a coping mechanism for BFCAs further underscores the value of critical inquiries within the intersectional framework. All nine participants conveyed how family support offered comfort and guidance amidst athletic and intersectional challenges. This theme resonates with prior research. Carter and Hart (2010), for instance, emphasize the significance of family support for BFCAs, serving as a tether to their cultural identity, offering guidance, and affirming their accomplishments and heritage. This support empowers athletes confronting marginalization by reinforcing their unique strengths and contributions (Carter & Hart, 2010). Moreover, family support plays a pivotal role for Black female college athletes, furnishing emotional, financial, academic, and cultural bolstering that enhances their well-being, resilience, and overall success (Carter & Hart, 2010).

Practical Implications

Utilizing the intersectionality framework also facilitated a critical praxis approach (Collins and Bilge, 2020). Furthermore, the application of intersectionality yielded actionable insights to address sources of anxiety among BFCAs, drawing from participant perspectives distilled from our findings.

Participants emphasized the crucial importance of diversifying leadership roles, such as coaching and athletic administration, to cultivate an environment of open dialogue around anxiety-related concerns. They believed enhanced diversity would enhance comprehension and support through shared experiences, thereby advancing the overall success of the athletic program. Supporting this notion, Hirko (2007) contends racial and cultural representation, coupled with effective communication within college athletics, fosters greater interracial interaction and understanding, ultimately contributing to improved well-being for both racial minority athletes and the broader college athlete community.

Sports institutions bear the responsibility of establishing an inclusive and just atmosphere for BFCAs, thereby mitigating anxiety and enhancing their holistic welfare. It is imperative for institutions to allocate financial resources toward bolstering representation. The presence of Black women in coaching, administrative, and leadership positions is paramount, as it engenders a sense of ease and relatability among BFCAs (Hirko, 2007). This proactive stance also underscores the organization's dedication to fostering equity in the face of racial, gender, and cultural diversities.

Institutions can further enhance the prevention and coping mechanisms for anxiety among BFCAs by actively integrating family support. College athletic departments and coaching staff should engage and educate athletes' families comprehensively in their overall development. This entails promoting consistent communi-

cation among athletes, families, academic advisors, and coaches to ensure a unified approach to supporting the athletes' aspirations. This collaborative effort empowers families to contribute insights into time and stress management, strategies for achieving work-life balance, and providing valuable external resources (Carter & Hart, 2010). Effective communication not only nurtures a supportive ambiance but also encourages athletes to openly discuss experiences, challenges, and goals with their families. Moreover, institutions should encourage higher family participation in athletes' competitions to amplify encouragement, cultivate a sense of belonging, and augment confidence and motivation. Encouraging families to establish connections with one another fosters a network of support, enabling the exchange of experiences, challenges, and guidance. This collective framework creates a sense of community and mutual understanding, further enriching the environment for BFCAs.

Conclusion

This study sought to comprehend and pinpoint anxiety-contributing factors in Black female college athletes, informing interventions aligned with their cultural context and presenting a distinct overview of their specific anxiety sources. While this population shares common anxiety triggers with their peers, like coaching demands and managing academic-athletic commitments, the distinctive influences of race and gender underscore the necessity for customized interventions. Integrating adapted well-being strategies for college athletes alongside tailored interventions for marginalized groups empowers researchers and institutions to target efficacious approaches. This research addresses a gap in the existing literature by delving into the lived experiences and anxiety determinants of BFCAs, an often-overlooked domain. Given the increasing presence of Black women in elite college sports, continued investigation is vital for enhancing their anxiety management strategies.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the outcomes of this study contributed to the progression of comprehending anxiety sources within marginalized athlete populations, the emphasis was placed on capturing the lived experiences of BFCAs. While findings may have transferable implications, the ability to generalize is confined as participants came from a single Division I program.

Future research should aim to recruit and study participants from diverse programs across the country to enhance the generalizability of findings. Additionally, further investigation is warranted to explore anxiety sources among racial and gender-marginalized college athletes (e.g., LatinX, Asian, Pacific Islander), and other groups across various athletic divisions. This is critical as the findings from this study align with similar patterns observed in these populations (Kroshus et al., 2023). This is because these racially diverse populations are also subjected to marginalization and lack the necessary support to address their psychological needs (Manwell et al., 2021; Ortega, 2021; Ramos et al., 2018). For instance, Chu et al. (2023) high-

lighted the experiences faced by Latinx college athletes within sporting environments that severely impacted their mental well-being. This was brought to light by instances of these athletes encountering racist and stereotypic remarks from both teammates and coaches due to misguided beliefs about their immigration status. This evidence emphasizes these challenges extend beyond the experiences of BFCAs and advocates the broader relevance of performing this research amongst varying marginalized populations.

Funding details

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